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ABSTRACT

The quality of a school's learning climate determines its success or failure. The learning climate includes school atmosphere and leadership. Implementing school improvement programs is a process that involves the whole school community. Among other factors, program success is most likely when administrators and faculty develop plans tailored to their school's problems. To guide the implementation process, the Learning Climate Inventory has been developed to provide a description of perceptions help by those involved with the school. Eight components containing 10 descriptive and evaluative items comprise the inventory. The components include collaborative decision making, instructional leadership, and parental involvement. The four steps in the learning climate improvement program implementation process are: (1) identifying problems; (2) discussing inventory results; (3) forming action committees; and (4) developing action plans. (18 references) (EJS)

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INSIGHTS ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Improving The Learning Climate

The quality of the learning climate determines a school's success or failure as a place of learning. Creating a positive climate, however, requires a process that involves the whole school community. This paper offers a process for local schools to use to identify learning climate components that need improvement. It suggests a participatory, problem-solving format that involves all members of the school community in addressing the perceived problems.

Importance of the Learning Climate

Effective schools research indicates that a school's learning climate is the determining factor in a school's success or failure as a place of learning (Purkey & Smith, 1982). The learning climate is the product of interactions between the organizational structure that surrounds the school and the roles, norms, and values expressed in the attitudes, behaviors, and communication patterns of the people involved (Purkey & Smith, 1982).

Sweeney (1983) pointed out that climate encompasses more than just the affective atmosphere of an organization. The climate of a school also includes (1) cohesiveness — the degree to which staff members are able to work together to solve problems; (2) expectations — the degree to which high expectations are communicated for both staff and students; (3) esprit — the feelings of satisfaction and loyalty among the staff; (4) goal orientation — the sense of direction shared by the staff; and (5) leadership — the process of successfully getting everyone to work together toward the same goals.

Implementing Improvement Programs

Developing a positive climate for learning in a school or district, however, requires a process that involves the whole school community. Extensive evidence suggests that most improvement efforts in education fail because of the processes used to implement them rather than because of the content of the programs (Gauthier, Pechenoe, & Shoemaker, 1985). A study of 293 Federal educational change projects in 18 states (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978) found that successful implementation was more likely when teachers had a clear understanding of the project goals; implementation decisions were made at the local school level; the project was adapted to the realities of the institutional setting; the school's organizational climate had a positive effect on implementation and continuation; the principal supported the project; and, in addition, the central district office supported the project and provided help.

More recent school improvement programs based on the effective schools research have also found these factors to be relevant to successful implementation. Indications are strong that school improvement initiatives should concentrate on the single school as the unit for improvement (Lezotte, 1982). For school improvement programs to be successful, districts need to encourage the administration and faculty of each school to develop plans based on the school staff's analysis of their own school's problems. Change cannot be imposed from the outside. The principal and teachers of each school, working with parents and students, need to think the school's problems through

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and determine their priorities for change (Quinby, 1985). Any lasting change will occur only when the staff itself changes its expectations, role definitions, standards of accountability, and patterns of behavior (McCormack-Larkin, 1985).

The Improvement Process

This paper offers an improvement process that focuses on the school learning climate. The process does not involve elaborate measurement, depend on outside consultants, or require specialized resources. The process is designed to be used by schools to identify learning-climate components perceived by the school community as needing improvement. It uses a participatory, problem-solving format that involves all members of the school community in addressing those perceived problems. The process requires the support of the district office, strong leadership by the principal, shared decision making, the commitment of the whole school community, and the investment of time, energy, and effort by everyone involved. Finally, it calls upon the members of the school community to become the experts in developing methods for dealing with the perceived problems.

Including the entire school community in identifying and solving school problems provides a number of benefits. First, the process has the potential to provide beleaguered administrators with assistance in addressing persistent school problems. Second, it taps the talent, creativity, and energy of a wide variety of people. Third, participation in organizational decision making by individuals who will be affected by the decisions and who are knowledgeable about the areas in which the decisions are to be made enhances feelings of satisfaction, encourages new ideas, improves the quality of the decisions by generating a number of alternatives that can be analyzed, and builds feelings of commitment to implementing solutions (Guthrie & Reed, 1986).

The Learning Climate Inventory

SEDL's Learning Climate Inventory* is one of a number of instruments that can be used to tap the perceptions of administrators, teachers, and other school staff. The Learning Climate Inventory provides a description of the perceptions of those closely associated with the school. The Inventory is composed of eight components containing ten items each. The items that make up each component have been derived from the research on effective schools. The components measured by the Inventory are described below.

Collaborative decision making. A positive learning climate exists when the school's resources and functions are directed by a commitment to agreed-upon goals, when there is shared decision making, when solving problems is a shared responsibility, and when a sense of collegiality is evident among the staff.

Instructional leadership. A positive learning climate exists when the instructional leaders of the school model behavior directed toward instructional goals; motivate instructional improvement and organize the school around effective instruction; identify staff strengths and potential; and provide learning opportunities for staff members to learn new skills and to strengthen or improve performance.

High expectations for students. A positive learning climate exists when the focus is on student learning and student acceptance of responsibility, and when students from all socioeconomic levels are expected to master both basic and higher-order skills.

Developing a safe and orderly environment. A positive learning climate exists when the total school environment is conducive to good discipline, when teachers show respect for students as individuals and for their cultural differences, and when rules and procedures are well-defined and communicated.

Curriculum and instructional practices. A positive learning climate exists when there is a well-planned curriculum with good continuity across grade levels and courses, and when a variety of instructional strategies are used that allow for student success and maximize learning.

Monitoring student progress. A positive learning climate exists when student progress is monitored frequently and when a variety of methods are used to provide students with feedback on their learning and teachers with feedback for modifying instruction.

Involving parents and the community. A positive learning climate exists when the instructional focus of the school is communicated to parents and the community, when their support is elicited, and when their involvement is encouraged

Physical environment. A positive learning climate exists when the physical environment is pleasant for adults and students and facilitates teaching and learning.

Steps In The Learning Climate Improvement Process

Identifying perceived problems. The first step in improving the school learning climate is to have members of the school community — administrators, teachers, other school personnel, and, when feasible, parents and students — complete the Learning Climate Inventory. The Inventory, rather than being designed to "measure" the learning climate in a school, is designed to provide a structure that focuses the school community's attention and discussion on those areas identified by the research as contributing to a positive learning climate. Each of the items that make up the component descriptions is scored on a five-point scale to indicate the degree to which the respondent agrees that the item describes "the way it is in our school." The distribution of responses are reported for each item, and the overall distribution for each component is charted.

Discussing the results of the Learning Climate Inventory. The data acquired from administering the Learning Climate Inventory represent the perceptions of members of the school community concerning the learning climate of the school. The results should be presented to the school community and discussed to identify those areas for which the responses indicate there is a perceived need for improvement. It would be appropriate at this point to involve the whole school community in establishing a "vision" for the school by defining a set of basic principles or beliefs to guide all the activities of the school.

Forming action committees. Next, the members of the school community must work together to decide what should be addressed in a school improvement program. The members will need to form "action committees" to address each identified problem. If the school-community group is large, more problems can be tackled at one time. If the group is small, undertaking fewer problems may be a wiser course. Another factor to be considered is the time available for action committees to meet for planning and the time available for action committees to meet with the whole school community in order to report on and implement the plans.

Developing action plans. The first question each committee needs to answer is: What do we want to achieve for our school — what are our goals? This entails describing what would be happening in the school if it conformed to the agreed-upon vision of what the school should be like. The second question that each committee should answer is: What is happening in our school that needs to be changed? The third question — How will we know when we have achieved those goals? — requires the committee to identify the conditions that will

be present to indicate that the goals have been reached. This provides a way of evaluating whether or not the actions taken have had any effect on the learning climate.

The most critical function of the action committee is to answer the fourth question: What steps can we take to get from where we are now to where we want to be? The answers to this question provide the basis for an action plan. Each committee uses the answers to the above questions to write formal action plans. A realistic time line should be established for the coordination of all the action plans and sufficient time should be allowed for the implementation of the plans. Improvement is a slow process — change may require as many as three to five years to fully plan and implement (Lezotte, 1982).

**Copies of SEDL's Learning Climate Inventory and the Learning Climate Improvement Process Workbook can be purchased from SEDL's Office of Institutional Communications for $2.00.*

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